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ABSTRACT

A study was undertaken of specialized magazine editors' perceptions of audience characteristics as well as the perceived role of their publications. Specifically, the study examines the relationship between the editors' perceptions of reader problem recognition, level of involvement, constraint recognition, and possession of reference criteria and the perceived role of the magazine in helping readers develop solutions to problems. Subjects were 29 editors of single-breed livestock magazines serving the United States beef, swine, and sheep producing industries. Data were gathered using a mail questionnaire distributed in December 1983. The results of the study suggested two things: (1) specialized magazine editors perceived of their readers as being most concerned about issues and topics that are both "close by" and "personally manageable" and saw their magazine as making the greatest contribution to readers in these areas, and (2) some issues are considered to be "active" and as such were perceived as being more important than others. (Author/HOD)

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A "Situational" and "Coorientational" Measure of Specialized Magazine Editors' Perceptions of Readers

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INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The trend toward specialization in the magazine industry is well documented. And, while it is easy to assume that the trend is a relatively new one, Taft, in his comprehensive analysis of the contemporary magazine industry, makes it clear this is not the case.[1] He notes magazines will soon be celebrating their 250th anniversary in America and that specialization has long been a part of their publishing strategy. Nevertheless, Taft does suggest that the intense degree of specialization is relatively new in the magazine publishing industry.

Other mass communication scholars support Taft's conclusions by detailing much of this specialization. In fact, one scholar believes that the trend toward specialization in the magazine industry is so pervasive that, depending upon advances in technology, the day may soon arrive when consumers can order magazines of unique content prepared especially for them.[2] It is important to note that, while the process of specialization in the magazine industry is intense, it is really an example of the fragmentation taking place in other media as well.[3] Consequently, researchers have begun to study the media use of specialized populations[4,5,6] as well as offer conjecture about the specialization of other media.[7]

As for research involving magazines, there have been historical studies,[8] assessments of magazines by type[9,10,11] and by region.[12] Also, there have been studies of what makes specific types of magazines effective[13] and the magazine use of specific demographic groups.[14,15] However, to date there has been very little study of the processes and perceptions responsible for contemporary magazine content. This may be partly due to the fact that the relationship between those responsible for providing the content of specialized magazines (editors) and the specialized audiences (readers) is a very complex

one. Fortunately, there are several theoretical perspectives available to guide research in this area and this study intends to make a contribution in this area.

In many ways it is fruitful to think of specialized audiences as "publics." In fact, when comparing an analysis of Blumer's and Dewey's seminal definitions of publics with a contemporary analysis of the specialized magazine audience it is clear there are many similarities.[16] Members of specialized audiences do seem to be publics that are bound together by common interests and activities. They have a need to communicate about specific topics and the communication often results in specific behavior. (Perhaps the primary reason the number of specialized magazines has increases is that advertisers realize this "specific behavior" often involves use of their products and services.) Consequently, Grunig's situational theory for explaining the communication behavior of publics seems particularly helpful for guiding research involving specialized audiences and their media.

Grunig, who has been developing his theory over a number of years,[17-24] says there are four independent variables that explain when and how people communicate about specific issues or topics and when they will have cognitions about these issues. These variables are PROBLEM RECOGNITION (whether a person has a "need for information" and stops to think about an issue), LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT (whether the person connects himself with the issue), CONSTRAINT RECOGNITION (whether the person thinks he can exert any personal control that might help resolve the issue) and the presence of a REFERENT CRITERION (whether the person thinks he has a solution for the issue or problem).

Past research using these variables indicates they help explain when individuals (and other behavioral systems) will engage in active information seeking or passive information processing. And, in looking at the role of

specialized publications within the total media environment, it would seem Grunig's theory has a great deal of utility for explaining the communication behavior of specialized audience publics.

For instance, given that, overall, there is a degree of involvement on the part of the reader with the general subject matter of the specialized publication, it seems reasonable to assume that readers will be concerned about specific issues or topics within the framework of the general subject matter. Further, it seems reasonable to assume that the reader's level of involvement and perceived constraint will vary from topic to topic, just as will the readers' perceptions of problem solutions.

As for determining how this might relate to the editorial process in specialized magazines, Culbertson's research on structural and perceptual factors operating in specialized journalism is useful.[25, 26] Culbertson is not sure readers of specialized publications are really well served because of structural factors operating to limit the diversity of perspectives being presented. However, there is more room for optimism in his call for an application of coorientation theory to an investigation of the editing behavior of specialized journalists.

He says there are five aspects to the process that takes place when an editor, trying to relate to his audience, makes choices among potential pieces of editorial content. Making up the first aspect are the editor's own interests and preferences (EO). Second, the communicator must consider the audience's own preferences (AO). In doing so, the editor must rely on his perceptions of audience preferences (EA). These three components allow for the establishment of two relationships: congruency, the similarity between "editor's own" (EO) and "editor's perceptions of audience" (EA) and understanding, the similarity between "editor's perceptions of audience" (EA) and

"audience's own" (AO) perceptions.

It is obvious from this analysis that the editor's perceptions of the audience's/public's preferences (EA) is a key element in the editing process. This component is particularly important for specialized publications because a specialized publication's "reason for being" is that it does a better job of serving as the "agent" for the reader than the more general mass media.

Given the above, it seems appropriate to combine the "situational" and "coorientational" theoretical perspectives and make the following assumptions about the editors of specialized magazines.

First, that editors of these magazines are sensitive to which issues or topics are of greater or lesser concern to their readers. In other words, editors are sensitive to reader "problem recognition."

Second, editors are aware of which of these issues or topics readers feel they have some control. In other words, editors are sensitive to reader "constraint recognition."

Third, editors are aware of issues with which their readers are likely to have the highest degree of personal involvement. In other words, editors are sensitive to reader "level of involvement."

Fourth, editors are aware of the topics/problems for which their readers have solutions. In other words, editors are sensitive to the presence of a referent criterion held by their readers.

It is this fourth assumption that may be the most important. Because, if editors of specialized publications are truly serving their readers, they are always in the process of helping readers develop solutions to their problems. Furthermore, it seems reasonable to assume that editors will claim some of the credit for helping readers find these solutions. In other words, it seems likely that editors of specialized magazines may very well believe their publication plays an important role in this process for the reader. (There is a certain "functional" logic in this interpretation. To the extent the magazine is meeting needs and serving a function for the reader, the more likely the magazine is to succeed as a business venture).

The above assumptions are consistent with Grunig's latest study in which he discusses an application of his situational theory to the reporting behavior of the Washington press corps.[27] Using a coorientational measure he found three out of five "gatekeeper" publics did indeed use perceptions of audience interests as a determining factor in their journalistic behavior. It is also consistent with recent findings by Culbertson that newspaper journalists fall into one of three categories--traditionalists, interpreters and activists.[28] He found traditionalists, like three of Grunig's publics, have high congruency while the activists (Grunig's other two publics) and interpreters have low congruency with the audience

METHODOLOGY

In order to test these assumptions, an exploratory and descriptive study of specialized magazine editors' perceptions of audience characteristics as well as the perceived role of their publication was undertaken. The general framework within which the study was conducted is that of agricultural communication--one of the most "specialized" fields of the magazine industry. Agricultural publications are often segmented both by geographic region and unit of agricultural production. This results in hundreds of publications serving very specific audience publics.[29,30]

Sample: The type of agricultural publication selected for study is that of single-breed livestock magazines serving the beef, swine and sheep producing industries. Consequently, a list of 34 editors was developed from the membership of the Livestock Publications Council. Headquartered in Encinitas, California, the Council was formed in 1974 and has over 100 members; (in-

cluding single-breed, multi-breed and association publications) primarily in the United States and Canada. These 34 magazines represent 56 percent of U.S. single-breed publications in a list compiled from the 1983-84 Standard Periodical Directory, the 1983 edition of Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory, the 1981-82 American Agricultural Editor's Association Membership Directory, and the January, 1984 LPC membership list.

Twenty-nine, or 85 percent, of these editors participated in the study. (See Appendix A for a list of publications represented). Nearly 83 percent of the editors have attended college with the largest percentage majoring in animal science (24.1%). Other majors included agricultural journalism (17.2%) and, journalism (13.8%). The respondents are veterans in the livestock publishing business, having worked in this area for a mean of nearly 12 years and in a management position at their current publication for a mean of over seven and half years. The mean circulation for their magazines was just under 6,500 with a range of 500 to 25,600.

Hypotheses: To test the assumptions noted above, the following hypotheses were formulated:

1. Editors of single-breed livestock magazines will, indeed, perceive of varying degrees of problem recognition, constraint recognition, involvement and the presence of referent criteria by their readers for different issue/topics.
2. The more editors of single-breed livestock magazines perceive of their readers as being involved, recognizing issue/topic problems, having solutions and being able to do something about them, the greater the perceived role of their magazine in the development of solutions to the issue/topic problems.

In essence, if the hypotheses hold, in addition to statistically significant variations in perceptual dimensions, the dependent variable of the magazine's perceived role in "providing solutions," should correlate positively with the independent variables of perceived audience "involvement," "problem recognition" and "presence of referent criteria" and correlate negatively with perceived audience "constraint."

Measurement and Data Collection: As Grunig notes, past research involving gatekeepers has primarily relyed on attitudanal variables. But his work, and the situational theory, suggest that "perceptions" related to specific issues are better predictors of communicator behavior.[31] Over the years, Grunig has developed very successful procedures for measuring the variables in his theory. Most recently, he "added" a coorientational measure when he measured communicators' perceptions of reader conceptions of the theoretical dimensions.[32] Essentially the same procedure was followed in this study using items developed by Grunig to measure the theoretical variables.

Specifically, the focus of the questions centered around a list of ten topic-issues identified by livestock industry, association and government officials as being important to livestock breeders. These are: federal and state regulation of the livestock producing industry, the marketing of surplus dairy cattle for beef, a growing emphasis on non-red meat sources of protein, trade association service to breeders, meat imports, herd improvement techniques, breed promotional activities, animal health, interest rates and credit, and meat grading.

Using these issues as a base, Grunig's questions were adapted to measure the theoretical variables of problem recognition, constraint recognition, level of involvement and presence of a referent criterion.

For problem recognition, editors were asked how often they thought their readers stopped to think about the issues. For constraint recognition, editors were asked if they thought their readers could do anything personally that would make a difference in the ways the issues were handled. For level of involvement, editors were asked to what extent they saw a connection between the issue and the personal situation of their readers. To detect the perceived presence of referent criteria, editors were asked how definite an

idea readers had about what should be done in these areas. Finally, in order to measure the perceived role of the magazine, editors were asked what role they thought their publication has played/is playing in helping readers develop solutions to problems related to those issues. In each case editors were given forced choice interval level responses that corresponded with those used by Grunig.[33]

Data for the study were gathered using a mail questionnaire distributed in December, 1983.[34] As previously noted, 29 of the 34 editors querried participated in the study. This is an exceptional response rate of 85 percent.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Data needed to test Hypothesis 1 are found in Tables 1-4. The hypothesis is supported in that, with only five exceptions (out of 50 tests) there are statistically significant differences in perceptions for the issue/topics on each of the theoretical dimensions.

This does suggest that editors are capable of evaluating their readers along these dimensions and that they do see differences in their readers depending upon the issue or topic. Specifically, the editors perceive of varying degrees of problem recognition, constraint recognition, involvement and presence of referent criteria by their readers for the different issue/topics.

In general, all of the issue/topics are seen as being on readers' minds with the exceptions of Non-Red Meat Sources of Protein and Surplus Dairy Cattle. Also, readers are seen as being able to do something about most of the issues with the exception of Meat Imports, Non-Red Meat Sources of Protein, Interest Rates and Credit, and Surplus Dairy Cattle. The issue of Surplus Dairy Cattle is the only issue perceived of as one where readers are not highly involved and the only one where they do not have ideas about solutions.

One of the most interesting findings illustrated by these tables is the

way in which the issue/topics consistently cluster in each theoretical dimension. Editors are in remarkable agreement as to which issues are at the top and bottom of each dimension. Ranked one through four on three of the four dimensions are the issue/topics of Herd Improvement Techniques, Breed Promotional Activities, Animal Health and Trade Association Service. (The issue/topic of Interest Rates and Credit replaces Trade Association Service on the Problem Recognition Dimension.) As for the bottom of these dimensions, Non-Red Meat Sources of Protein and Surplus Dairy Cattle are the issue/topics that consistently rank here.

Data needed to test Hypothesis 2 are found in Tables 5 and 6. In general, this hypothesis is also supported. As Table 5 indicates, in seven out of the ten issue/topics there are significant correlations on three out of the four theoretical dimensions with the perceived role of the magazine. In other words, the more editors perceive of their readers as being involved, recognizing issue/topic problems having solutions to these problems and being able to do something about them, the greater the perceived role of the publication in the development of solutions to these problems.

Additional data to support this finding is located in Table 6. Editors see their publications as playing an important role in helping readers find solutions to problems in the same four areas that cluster at the top in the four theoretical dimensions. These are Breed Promotional Activities, Herd Improvement Techniques, Animal Health and Trade Association Service. Editors perceive of their publication as being the least effective for the Surplus Dairy Cattle issue--the same issue that falls on the bottom of the theoretical dimensions.

It is also worth noting that the perceived level of involvement with the issue and a perceived lack of constraint seem to be the two theoretical dimensions most strongly related to editors' perceptions that their magazine

plays an important role in helping readers find solutions to problems. In each case, there are significant correlations for eight of the ten issue/topics.

What does all this mean for those interested in both the development of specialized magazines and mass communication theory?

First, the results of this study suggest that specialized magazine editors perceive of their readers as being most concerned with issues and topics that are both "close by" and "personally manageable." Consequently, they see their magazine as making the greatest contribution to individual readers in these areas.

This conclusion is supported by two kinds of findings in this study. First, there is the fact that the two theoretical dimensions having the strongest relationship to perceived role of the publication are involvement and lack of constraint. The second finding that supports this conclusion is in the nature of the issue/topics rankings. Consistently, Herd Improvement Techniques, Breed Promotional Activities, Animal Health and Trade Association Service are issue/topics that rank high on the dimensions. All of these issues are ones that breeders deal with personally on their ranch or farm. This is easiest to see with the first three topics (where, for instance, a breeder works to improve his herd through artificial insemination) but is evident in the Trade Association Service as well. Most of the breed associations have limited numbers of members. Consequently, those who belong are highly involved and often can make a significant difference as an individual.

The issues that rank low on the theoretical dimensions (and hence are seen as ones that the magazine plays a less important role in providing solutions) are ones that are "distant" and "difficult to control" by the individual breeder. While theoretically the individual rancher has some impact on the federal and state regulations affecting his industry, for in-

stance, from a practical standpoint it may be minimal.

The second conclusion that can be drawn is that there is some validity to the notion that a specialized magazine editor perceives of these theoretical dimensions as being interrelated. That is, the issue/topics that rank high on one dimension, rank high on the others as well. (And, vice-versa.) This has important theoretical as well as practical implications. From a theoretical standpoint, what this finding suggests is that even with a relatively homogenous population (in this case breeders) it is possible to identify issues on which, editors at least, perceive of their readers as falling into differing categories of "publics." Those issues in which readers are perceived as high on all dimensions, are issues that Grunig would suggest lead to formation of "active" publics. While, "low" issues would result in "latent" or "non-existent" publics.

From a practical standpoint, it is easy to speculate that editors are more concerned about providing magazine content that speaks to the "active" issues rather than the "latent" or "non-existent" issues. An important question can be raised by asking when (and how) does a "latent" issue move through Grunig's stages of "non-existent," to "latent," to "aware" to "active." Does the magazine editor initiate this process, or does he/she merely respond to other factors that change the nature of his/her readers' concerns.

As with other exploratory studies, there are more questions raised by the results than answers provided. For instance, using the results of this study, it is not possible to say anything about the actual editing behavior of the magazine editors. A focus for an additional study would be to examine magazine content as a way of determining if editors translate their perceptions of reader attributes into specific copy dealing with these topics.

Nor is this study capable of allowing conclusions to be drawn about the congruency between editors and readers. An investigation into the editors'

own perceptions on the same dimensions would be needed to make this comparison. Also this study does not allow for any statements about the accuracy of the editors' perceptions. For this, a measure of the readers' thinking on these dimensions is needed.

In spite of these limitations, the results of this study suggest that the marriage of situational theory and coorientation results in a useful approach for investigating specialized magazine editing behavior.

TABLE 1

PROBLEM RECOGNITION

Editors' Perceptions of Readers' Frequency of "Thinking About Problems or Issues."[1]

	Percent Often (1)	Percent Sometimes (2)	Percent Rarely (3)	Percent Never (4)	Mean
Herd Improvement Techniques	93.1	6.9	0	0	1.069
Animal Health	82.8	17.2	0	0	1.172
Breed Promotional Activities	69.0	31.0	0	0	1.310
Interest Rates & Credit	69.0	24.1	3.4	3.4	1.414
Federal & State Regulation	37.9	51.7	6.9	3.4	1.759
Trade Association Service	34.5	41.4	24.1	0	1.897
Meat Imports	17.2	69.0	13.8	0	1.966
Meat Grading	34.5	37.9	24.1	3.4	1.966
Non-red Meat Sources of Protein	10.3	34.5	51.7	3.4	2.483
Surplus Dairy Cattle	7.1	32.1	39.3	21.4	2.750

[1] Chi-Square for each topic is significant beyond .05 with the exception of Surplus Dairy Cattle

TABLE 2

CONSTRAINT RECOGNITION

Editors' Perceptions of Whether Readers "Could Do Anything Personally" About Issues[1]

	Percent Great Deal (1)	Percent Some Difference (2)	Percent Little Difference (3)	Percent No Difference (4)	Mean
Herd Improvement Techniques	86.2	13.8	0	0	1.138
Breed Promotional Activities	82.8	13.8	3.4	0	1.207
Animal Health	72.4	20.7	6.9	0	1.345
Trade Association Service	41.4	37.9	17.2	3.4	1.828
Federal & State Regulation	6.9	51.7	41.4	0	2.345
Meat Grading	20.7	31.0	34.5	13.8	2.414
Meat Imports	6.9	31.0	44.8	17.2	2.724
Non-Red Meat Sources of Protein	0	34.5	37.9	27.6	2.931
Interest Rates & Credit	3.4	20.7	41.4	34.5	3.069
Surplus Dairy Cattle	0	13.8	58.6	27.6	3.138

[1]Chi-Square for each topic is significant beyond 0.5 with the exception of Meat Grading

TABLE 3

LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT

Editors' Perceptions of Readers' Degree of "Connection With the Issues"[1]

	Percent Strong Connection (1)	Percent Moderate Connection (2)	Percent Weak Connection (3)	Percent No Connection (4)	Mean
Herd Improvement Techniques	86.2	10.3	0	3.4	1.207
Breed Promotional Activities	79.3	17.2	0	3.4	1.276
Animal Health	69.0	27.6	0	3.4	1.379
Trade Association Service	41.4	48.3	6.9	3.4	1.724
Federal & State Regulation	31.0	51.7	13.8	3.4	1.897
Interest Rates & Credit	48.3	17.2	20.7	13.8	2.000
Meat Grading	31.0	37.9	27.6	3.4	2.034
Meat Imports	24.1	48.3	24.1	3.4	2.069
Non-Red Meat Sources of Protein	24.1	31.0	37.9	6.9	2.276
Surplus Dairy Cattle	14.3	21.4	32.1	32.1	2.821

[1]Chi-Square for each topic is sugnificant beyone .05 with the exception of Surplus Dairy Cattle and Non-Red Meat Sources of Protein

TABLE 4

PRESENCE OF REFERENT CRITERION

Editors' Perceptions of Readers' "Idea for Solutions to Problems"[1]

	Percent Definite Idea (1)	Percent Somewhat Definite (2)	Percent Indefinite Idea (3)	Percent No Idea (4)	Mean
Herd Improvement Techniques	55.2	41.4	3.4	0	1.483
Breed Promotional Activities	48.3	51.7	0	0	1.517
Animal Health	41.4	48.3	10.3	0	1.690
Trade Association Service	24.1	48.3	27.6	0	2.034
Interest Rates & Credit	17.2	44.8	27.6	10.3	2.310
Meat Grading	17.2	41.4	31.0	10.3	2.345
Meat Imports	6.9	51.7	37.9	3.4	2.379
Federal & State Regulation	17.2	34.5	41.4	6.9	2.379
Non-Red Meat Sources of Protein	13.8	27.6	48.3	10.3	2.552
Surplus Dairy Cattle	6.9	17.2	48.3	27.6	2.966

[1]Chi-Square for each topic is significant beyond .05 with the exception of Meat Grading

TABLE 5

PEARSON CORRELATIONS OF PERCEIVED ROLE OF MAGAZINE WITH PROBLEM RECOGNITION, CONSTRAINT RECOGNITION, LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT AND PRESENCE OF REFERENT CRITERION

	Percent Recognition	Constraint Recognition	Level of Involvement	Referent Criterion
Breed Promotional Activities	.28	.35[a]	.33[2]	.32[a]
Herd Improvement Techniques	.25	.38[a]	.22	.25
Animal Health	.47[b]	.41[b]	.30[a]	.35[a]
Trade Association Service	.34[a]	.44[b]	.43[b]	.23
Meat Grading	.35[a]	.36[a]	.15	.57[b]
Federal & State Regulation	.35[a]	.14	.65[b]	-.27
Meat Imports	.07	.05	.40[b]	-.01
Non-Red Meat Sources of Protein	.10	.35[a]	.42[b]	.45[b]
Interest Rates & Credit	.11	.42[b]	.38[b]	.33[a]
Surplus Dairy Cattle	.67[b]	.57[b]	.62[b]	.50[b]

[a] $p < .05$

[b] $p < .01$

[1] Correlations for constraint recognition are "positive" because of direction of responses on questionnaire.

TABLE 6

MAGAZINE ROLE

Editors' Perceptions of Role Magazine is Playing in "Helping Readers Find Solutions"[1]

	Percent Very Important Role (1)	Percent Important Role (2)	Percent Little Role (3)	Percent No Role (4)	Mean
Breed Promotional Activities	75.9	20.7	3.4	0	1.276
Herd Improvement Techniques	72.4	24.1	3.4	0	1.310
Animal Health	35.7	60.7	3.6	0	1.679
Trade Association Service	41.4	34.5	20.7	3.4	1.862
Meat Grading	10.3	48.3	20.7	20.7	2.517
Federal & State Regulation	6.9	20.7	62.1	10.3	2.759
Meat Imports	3.4	20.7	62.1	13.8	2.862
Non-Red Meat Sources of Protein	3.4	6.9	65.5	24.1	3.103
Interest Rates & Credit	10.3	65.5	0	24.1	3.138
Surplus Dairy Cattle	0	3.4	41.4	55.2	3.517

[1]Chi-Square for each topic is significant beyond .05

FOOTNOTES

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32 Ibid., pp. 606-607

33 Grunig and Hunt, pp. 150-151.

34 A complete copy of the questionnaire is available from the author upon request.

A "Situational" and "Coorientational" Measure of Specialized Magazine Editors' Perceptions of Readers

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ABSTRACT

The magazine industry leads the mass communication field in the trend toward specialization. Yet, to date, there has been very little study of the processes responsible for the content of specialized publications. Focusing on the highly specialized field of agricultural magazines, this study helps to remedy this situation.

Using two theoretical perspectives (a "situational" one developed by Grunig and a "coorientational" approach frequently used by Culbertson) this study tests for the relationship between editors' perceptions of reader problem recognition, level of involvement, constraint recognition and possession of referent criteria (all categories postulated by situational theory) and the perceived role of the magazine in helping readers develop solutions to problems. Twenty-nine editors of single-breed livestock magazines serving the U.S. beef, swine and sheep producing industries participated in the study.

In addition to adding validity to this marriage of theoretical approaches for investigating specialized magazine editing behavior, the results of this study suggest two things: First, specialized magazine editors perceive of their readers as being most concerned about issues and topics that are both "close by" and "personally manageable." Furthermore, they see their magazine as making the greatest contributions to readers in these areas. Second, the results suggest that some issues are what might be called "active" (as opposed to "latent," for example) and as such are perceived as being more important than others. Further investigation of actual editing behavior, congruency and accuracy of editors' perceptions is advocated.